

Frida kahlo and tracey emin: psychoanalytic approaches



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Case Study One: Frida Kahlo 2000

The intention of this dissertation is to define links between psychoanalytic theories and fine art. In this chapter the artist's Frida Kahlo and Tracey Emin are discussed and compared to see how psychoanalytic approaches differ when employed with contemporary and traditional art.

Frida Kahlo's work is associated with Surrealism, an art movement first written about by Andre Breton; it was founded in 1924 developing from Dadaism and was inspired by the psychoanalytic works of Freud. In the surrealist manifesto Breton identifies the movement as a means by which the subconscious could be expressed, verbally, written or painted. The surrealists believed that our conscious mind interferes with the subconscious part, which is heavily based on Freud's theory of the ego and the id. The surrealists believed that this is why we have dreams; when we are asleep the reasoning mind cannot control the subconscious. Surrealism used a method called free association, originally Freud's theory, whereby Freud's patient would automatically say what they are thinking, in the case of an artist they would paint without thinking. Consequently, it seems surrealism is not necessarily a style but a method of painting. By looking at the both Kahlo and Emin, the two can be compared to distinguish the ways in which psychoanalysis differs in the opposing styles of work, one of traditional movement and the other a contemporary style.

Kahlo's work deals with a diverse range of subjects, from her own identity and pain to politics, the Mexican artists' work has been deliberated over by many critics and art historians as her oeuvre covers many aspects of art. It is

hard to place as surrealist as it mixes a world fantasy with surrealism while also dealing with sexuality, race and gender. However, it is contended that Kahlo's work does support psychoanalytical theories as there are many connections between her work and Freud's work which is a factor that the surrealist movement was heavily based upon.

In contrast the work of Tracey Emin does not use symbols for her audience to guess at, instead her work has a very clear and concise in meaning, through her highly personal work she leaves her audience unquestioning with no ambiguity surrounding it. However, it would be interesting to look at the psychological effects that the production of this type of work may have on the artist and to investigate how the process creating art work of such personal nature has any psychological impact. This will enable understanding of the intentions behind such personal art work; she articulates details about herself that a majority of people would rather keep to themselves. In a similar way to Kahlo, both artists draw on their own experiences to produce art work.

In Kahlo's painting, Tree of Hope (see figure one), she presents the audience with a definite divide between night and day. This use of this strongly imply a state of dream, to explore R. D Laing's theory of the unembodied self where the " individual experiences him self as being more or less divorced form his body"(Laing1965: 69) this applied to Kahlos work suggests that the severe act of cutting the image into two halves defines the feeling of separation from her conscious body. The spectator is aware of the false self being portrayed within the image. According to Laing such separation denies the unembodied self of any actual interaction with everyday life. The theory <https://assignbuster.com/frida-kahlo-and-tracey-emin-psychoanalytic-approaches/>

suggests the unembodied self becomes a spectator of the life in which the actual body lives, so therefore does not connect with any experience the physical body encounters. This psychoanalytical process occurs due to stress within ones life that the ego cannot deal with, the disassociation is the ids way of protecting the ego.

In Kahlo's piece " Tree of hope" the painting is " not clothed in the prosaic language usually employed by our thoughts... represented symbolically by means of similes and metaphors" (Freud, 1953: 633) The image renders narrative, through the day harsh reality is awakened; Kahlo collides with a profusion of pain, while at night she is set free from her anguish by her dreams, the subconscious mind allows her to escape. The use of colours and choice of composition has allowed her to deliver her innermost anxieties and fears to the audience. These anxieties, according to Freud, are unpleasant inner state that people seek to avoid, it can act as a signal to the ego that things are not going right, as humans we suffer from neurotic, reality and moral anxieties, in order to deal with these Freud states that we therefore go into defence mechanisms that protect the ego from conflicts caused by the id, the id being the unconscious part of your brain, the ego is the conscious rational mind.

The stress caused by daily lives is relevant to Freudian theory of sublimation. In Freud's book " The ego and the id" (1923) he established the theory of sublimation through superior recognition and puts forward that the " superego is an internal moral agency of the parents" (Wright: 1995). He assumed that there are two separate sets of drives, both contained within the mind. The instincts consist of self-preservation, which is associated with <https://assignbuster.com/frida-kahlo-and-tracey-emin-psychoanalytic-approaches/>

the ego; the second is sexual instincts which are associated to the libido or id. These instincts direct all human conduct until he generated the existence of narcissism. These theories differ over the various writings due to the topic and their affiliation to each other. To further this, if Freud's theory about anxiety is applied to Tracey Emin's work it can be suggested that she goes through the process of sublimation; her work is a healthy redirection of an emotion which is mainly found through art, it is the process of transforming the libido into achievements that are accepted by society. Emin's work is similar to Kahlo's in the way that her own personal stories of her body reiterate stories in the media. Emin expresses graphic descriptions of her most intimate feelings as her work is based solely on her life experiences.

For example, in Emin's work " The last thing I said to you was don't leave me here" the audience is confronted with a photograph of a vulnerable girl, who is tucked in a corner of some small shack, suggesting she has been some sort of victim of abuse. Lacan's theory of the gaze is a theory that can be tested on this photograph, as the set up of composition makes the audience feel as if they are standing behind this naked, vulnerable person, so the viewer is made to feel as if they are gazing upon her, the spectators take on the role of the voyeur. Emin poses the question, is she the " object of desire?" There is a certain amount of irony within the photograph as a majority of viewers are hardened to the image of naked women due to media; mediated imagery is usually of very confident, provocative women, this perplexing view unsteadies the viewer due to the uneasy ambience. This is because photography can in a literal sense turn the depicted person into an object, which will distance both the viewer and the viewed. With her back

to us she unaware of who is looking, which creates a sense of naivety within the work, so therefore the viewer becomes uncomfortable with the role of the voyeur. This work has subtle implications that are more suggestive compared to a majority of Emin's work which has a great sense of immediacy and provocative substance; she makes strong statements that judge the gaze of society that is put upon women.

In contrast Kahlo's works show the audience how she gazes upon herself, in theory Kahlo's paintings are able to talk to the viewer as they express something about the artist's emotions which people can relate to on many levels, through their personal attributes. This supports Derrida's theory of deconstruction, where by deconstruction of a body of text is not just one, it can have several different meanings, and this theory can be applied to artwork because artwork itself can have more than one interpretation. In the essay Derrida two paintings in paint: a note on art, discourse and the trace, Jeff Collins argues that Derrida " indicates a certain failure of discourse in the face of artworks" (Holdridge, 2006: 213). Collins contends that Derrida's theory suggests art is a confrontational method which challenges anything that refuses to accept or surpass it; the author denotes artwork that does not have a dialogue to deal with this theory.

Kahlo's work can be contradictory in meaning for each viewer; which can be associated with the notion of death of the author; according to Barthes, the viewers own beliefs can change the authors original intensions, the layering of meaning can only be derived from the viewer's point of view, as they will see the work and interpret it according to their own context, beliefs

experiences or personal attributes. The viewer needs to be able to set apart
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the artist from the work to release the interpretation from any prejudice. Barthes believe that this is dependent on the spectator's experience of Kahlo's work, being a renowned artist many people will be familiar with her histories and will derive an interpretation from that in itself. However, many audiences are not familiar with the work will read it in an entirely different light.

Kahlo also uses messages and paradoxes within her work. In "The little wounded deer" (see figure four) she portrays herself as this wounded animal, which has been shot at by numerous hunters. The arrows are metaphors for the pain she feels, in my opinion this could symbolize her injuries from her accident or it could represent suffering from numerous disappointments in her life. She appears calm, tranquil and relaxed while she is watched by, what we assume is a hunter and dripping with blood.

Kahlo was Mexican and they believed that a newborn human has an animal counterpart and that person's fate was tied to that of the animal that represents the calendar sign of the day of their birth. So she could be suggesting that her animal counterpart is dying and therefore metaphorically she is going to be rid of the animal that matches her and through her rebirth she will gain a new one. This painting it therefore a representation of her thoughts, which is her subconscious, by using dream logic strategies of displacement and condensation, Kahlo sets out to create a fabled identity for herself; the self-portrait consequently becomes a format for a parody of her own individuality. In my opinion, surrealism and representing the mind is difficult because it is the unknown, questioning it and giving possible answers through painting.

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Through her art Kahlo is attaining control of herself, she portrays her emotions which attain psychological relief. Emin also has a need to attain control would, in Freudian terms this would be classified as a form of hysteria. Hysteria in current psychological terms is described as two categories, one being somatoform whereby mental problems such as stress can cause brain to feel physical pain. The second is dissociative which occurs when a persons psyche cannot handle a particularly traumatic event. However, in Freudian terms this hysteria created by the subconscious part of the mind, which was protecting the ego from the id. This is also relevant when looking at Kahlo's work, the subconscious creates this form of unreality which is evident in the paintings. The straight lines and defined edge to objects of natural entities creates an order, an element of control over something which is not controllable.

This can be tested with Deleuze's theory of percept. According to Deleuze, art requires " simple modulations" whereby the artist is consciously thinking and making decisions about the evolution of the piece of artwork; percepts are a psychological imprint of something, for example, the way an individual artist sees one thing will be varied from another. Percepts represent more than decision, they symbolize how the artist is feeling about that piece of art at the moment in time, or the subject which it is based on. According to Deleuze the making of the decision is not as important as modulations, Mnter has put boundaries around the manmade objects, the " modulations... reveal the forces 'that populate the world, that affect us, that make us become'" (Sutton, 2008: 75) Kahlo keeps her images separate, in " Tree of hope" (see figure one) she has a definite divide between night and

day, by doing this she accentuates definite boundaries that the colours alone would not achieve, this establishes a harsh boarded image with restrictions. It shows a definite division between the human and the natural, while addressing this we may also consider that the artist may feel the two cannot be combined. These percepts also occur in the works of Kahlo, " What Water Gave Me" (1938) is a painting of Kahlo's that is particularly relevant to Derrida's theory, other than her many self-portraits, within this painting, Kahlo has painted her legs from the bath's viewpoint, her legs are partially obscured by the bath water, and her toes stick out at the end, the painting has an uncanny aspect to it, we have all see this viewpoint so there is a familiarity to the work. Kahlo is allowing her audience to see things from her perspective. Through the composition we are able to see her thoughts swimming about as she contemplates everything that has occurred in her life. The modulations in this piece are life and death, something that is uncontrollable yet is inevitable. " Everything moves according to one law- life... Anguish and pain, pleasure and death are nothing but a process in order to exist." (Kahlo) Her written views are contrasting to that expressed in her paintings. This painting is affective because it invites the viewer into the work; in affect the spectator completes it. Through this image Kahlo displays herself bare for every one to see; which adds a certain irony to the painting, as it is almost a nude portrait. In addition, this painting fits the classification of Surrealism because she utilizes imagery, which combines dream imagery with reality.

In this chapter, the discussion of Kahlos and Emin's work have given insight into the way in which psychoanalytical theories can be used in conjunction

with artworks. It defines how the use of these theories can induce more depth into a painting which may not have had much substance to begin with. This in itself confirms Deleuzes theory of percept showing how the artists mind is both in the real world in which the body exists and in the world of the self, this theory will be challenged further in correlation with Cindy Shermans work in the next chapter.